Pain took football away from Andrew Luck; what brought him back to Stanford?

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Aug. 18, 2025 | Updated 6:20 am PDT

87

PALO ALTO, Calif. — He built his house on the water thinking he'd never leave.

It was five minutes from the Indianapolis Colts' practice facility. It's where his kids would grow up, where he and his wife would ease into middle age. It's where he imagined storing a Super Bowl ring or two. Life was simpler then, "a binary existence" Andrew Luck once called it, when he still had so much in front of him.

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"I was gonna play until I was 40 or 45," he says.

For a moment, the thought lingers. A smile creases his face.

"You think you're invincible. At least I did."

Then came the pain, four miserable years of it, and football became the enemy, the root of his unhappiness. His smile fades. "I fell out of love," Luck says, reducing one of the most shocking retirements in NFL history into five tidy words. The end was a blur of sleepless nights and naked truths and a well of guilt that's never really gone away.

He tried moving on. A game would flash across the TV and he'd groan. He'd have dreams about football, and his old life, and everything he'd left behind. For a while it felt like he was in a fog. *I can't be 30 years old and retired,* he'd tell himself. *This is ridiculous*.

Then, something he didn't see coming: The game that was once brutally beaten out of him slowly began to pull him back in.

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His look these days is far more college professor than former All-American quarterback: wiry glasses, trendy sports coat, slim-fit slacks. The Paul Bunyan biceps that once bulged beneath his shoulder pads are gone. Andrew Luck is a skinny 35-year-old. Most days, he's thrilled if he has the time to sneak in a 20-minute workout.

He's nine months on the job as general manager of the Stanford University football program. He texts staffers as early as 6 in the morning and as late as 9:30 at night. He calls season-ticket holders and asks them to renew. He sells. He scouts. He fundraises. He builds hope. He jumps on the practice field and runs the offense for a few snaps, revving that same raspy cadence that Jim Harbaugh taught him on these same fields 17 years ago.

He recruits over the phone and welcomes prospects into his office. "Hi, I'm Andrew," he'll tell them, like they didn't just walk past a floor-to-ceiling image of him in the hallway, back when he was young and strong and in his cardinal No. 12, looking to throw deep. *No. 1 overall pick in the NFL Draft*, it reads. *Maxwell Award winner*. *Walter Camp Award winner*. *Johnny Unitas Golden Arm winner*. And on and on.

The banner above speaks for itself: "QUARTERBACK FOR THE AGES."

"I have almost three-fourths of my life left," Andrew Luck told himself a few years into retirement. "I'm tired of being stuck." (Courtesy Stanford Athletics)

Luck claims the job offer was a surprise, and there's a running joke inside the building about how he first reacted. He likes to tell his staff that he played it cool, nodded his head and promised to think about it for a few days. Most don't buy that version.

It was last October. Luck was meeting with new Stanford president Jonathan Levin, discussing the sagging state of a once-proud program. The Cardinal were in the midst of a fourth straight three-win season. At one point, Levin threw out an idea.

Luck's impulse, he told close friends, was to jump out of the chair and scream "HELL YEAH!" Those friends aren't entirely sure he didn't.

So, for the second time in five years, Luck's plan for the future took a sudden turn.

In 2022, he'd moved his family — he and wife Nicole have two young daughters — from that house they built in Indianapolis to Palo Alto while he earned his master's in education. Degree in hand, they were headed out of state, retreating to a small town in the mountains. Luck was going to coach high school football and fade even further from public view.

But this was Stanford, a place and a program that remained deeply important to him. "The story of my identity, a huge part of it, is coming here," he says. This is where Harbaugh taught him to bark out plays *like a real quarterback*, with a gravelly voice that cut through the wind and crowd noise. It's where he and his teammates would hum the Darth Vader theme from "Star Wars" on their walks to the most grueling practices of the season. It's where he learned there were no shortcuts in turning around a program that was 1-11 when he committed and 11-2 when he left.

Now that program needed him, badly. Luck had a chance to lead a team again.

"He's not a back-of-the-room guy," says David Shaw, Luck's coach for his final college season. "He never has been."

The job Levin proposed was both innovative and intentionally vague. In the professionalized world of college football, a handful of programs have identified the need for a CEO-type who oversees the entire operation while simultaneously acclimating to the demands of the NIL era. Stanford was falling behind. Levin knew it. Under prior leadership, the school had stubbornly refused to embrace NIL deals as recruiting inducements, leaving its roster lacking the talent needed to compete at the national level.

The Stanford football program Luck would be taking over was not the Stanford football program he left.

The role, Levin decided, couldn't be a ceremonial one. He wasn't hiring Luck to be a figurehead. He was hiring him to save the team.

"Did we need him? A thousand percent we needed him," says Matt Doyle, the Cardinal's longtime director of operations. "There was no one else."

Had the job been offered two or three years ago, Luck says, he wouldn't have been ready. He was still processing the end, trying to answer the questions his retirement forced him to confront.

took off. “I can tell ya, I have some serious empathy for stay-at-home parents,” Luck says. “Because that is a *calling*.”

In his free time, he skied. He surfed. He fished. He camped. He went to therapy. Eventually, he started watching football again.

“At one point, I was like, ‘I have almost three-fourths of my life left. I’m tired of being stuck.'”

The game had battered him, then emptied him. He needed time to grieve. The more he did, the more it hit him: *that* was part of his story, too. The end. The pain. The decision he never questioned and the bitterness he wouldn’t let creep in. Even at his lowest point, while tears reddened in his eyes after he’d been booed off his home field the night he retired, Luck stood behind a lectern and thanked football for the hard moments that led him there. He was grateful, even for the scars.

“When your love for the game is born at a young age, that’s deep inside you,” his former Stanford teammate Tavita Pritchard says. “The end hurt, but it didn’t change that for him.”

Luck knows he could’ve been anything — as a Stanford undergrad, he majored in architectural design, and in the NFL he’d routinely wow teammates and coaches with thoughts on world history and geopolitics (his offensive linemen once gave him grief for reading a book on concrete). Retirement offered a clean slate, the chance to explore any arena he wanted. Instead, Luck found himself looking for a way back into football.

He watched his old teammate T.Y. Hilton haul in a 53-yard bomb for the Dallas Cowboys and screamed like he’d thrown the pass. He considered starting a clinic for high school coaches. In grad school, he volunteered at Palo Alto High just so he could be around quarterbacks again.

Those afternoons reminded him why he’d fallen for the sport in the first place. There was a purity to it, Luck always felt, this sense of raw brutality that he first came to crave as a teenager: it was 11-on-11, our best against your best, with nowhere to hide. Everything that followed — the hype, the accolades, the attention, the money — was merely noise to him.

The emotion he carried with him wasn’t regret, but something else. He knew he’d made the right decision. He just hated what he left behind.

“I’ll always have guilt about how it ended,” Luck says. “I let my teammates down.”

That’s always what fueled him, through a ruptured kidney and torn abdominal muscles and a ravaged throwing shoulder: the locker room. When he chose to return to Stanford for his senior year — turning down the chance to go

He didn't finish with his guys in the NFL. All that pain got in the way.

Six years later, that's what bothers him most.

Stanford's HR department needed a resume, so Luck cobbled one together. He'd only ever had one job, "if you don't count clock operator my senior year of high school," he says, laughing that hyuk-hyuk-hyuk laugh of his.

Professional quarterback, he wrote on the application. *Seven years*. Under references, he listed the first three names he could think of: Chris Ballard, the Colts' GM; Frank Reich, his last coach in the NFL; and Jacoby Brissett, his former backup and close friend. Reason for leaving: *Retired*.

"Not that simple, huh?" Luck says.

Then he jumped in. He picked Ballard's brain, wanting to learn everything he could about building a team. He visited Celtics president Brad Stevens in Boston. He called up Oklahoma City Thunder GM Sam Presti. He learned how difficult high school recruiting is. "What are we missing?" he kept asking his staff. "What do we need?"

Since his arrival, the high-five count in the building has skyrocketed — it's how Luck likes to end meetings. Doyle estimates they're averaging between five and eight a day.

"People ask me all the time, 'Does Andrew really come to the office?" Doyle says. "I'm like, 'He's here all day, every day.'"

Luck has become the public face of the program, the emcee at fundraising events, the star of social media posts, the sounding board for former Stanford stars sick of watching their alma mater slog through losing seasons. It's been a stunning reversal for a man who was all but invisible the first few years after he retired. Luck's not simply tolerating the spotlight; he seems to be enjoying it.

"I did not take this job to hide in a cocoon," he says.

But even luring the program's "Quarterback for the Ages" back to campus might not be enough. The gig is among the toughest in the sport: Not only is Luck tasked with turning Stanford around, but he must do so while the ground shifts beneath his feet. Years of conference realignment, including the dissolution of the traditional Pac-12, left Stanford and archrival California in the lurch. The Cardinal now play in the Atlantic Coast Conference, with half their road games taking place on the opposite coast.

“College football is *hard* right now,” says Pritchard, a Cardinal assistant for 12 years and now the Washington Commanders’ quarterbacks coach. “And Andrew’s going to try and do this in a way that still feels very Stanford.”

The question is: Can that way still work?

Shaw, the winningest coach in program history, leans on something he used to tell Luck and his teammates all the time: “The fact that it’s hard, that’s what makes it great.”

The program has finally decided to pay players — “We’re serious about it,” Luck vows — but won’t earn a full slice of media rights money from the ACC for several seasons. The school won’t bend on academics, either, and compared to other schools, Stanford’s transfer rate remains incredibly low. How will Luck navigate a new era for the sport in which some top prospects prize a fat payout over a prestigious degree?

“We’ve got a lot to prove,” he says, undeterred. “I’m fine with that.”

It wasn’t until late March that most in the college football world fully grasped his authority. He had been on the committee that hired Troy Taylor as head coach in 2022, but after two third-party investigations into Taylor’s behavior were made public in an ESPN report, Luck decided the program needed a reset. (Taylor sued ESPN last month, alleging defamation.)

It was the first time Luck had ever fired someone. He did not enjoy it. But it was not the athletic director’s call to make. It was his.

“I’m in charge of the program,” he says. “I’m not sure that fully resonated with folks until then.”

After Luck fired Taylor, he made one phone call. Reich, who’d been fired by the Colts in 2022 and the Carolina Panthers a year later, was pushing a shopping cart through a Costco in Virginia, 10 minutes from his lake house. In his mind, he was retired.

“I need you to come out here and coach,” Luck told him.

"What do you mean, coach?" Reich said. He didn't know Stanford had a vacancy.

"Be the head coach," Luck replied. "Well, interim head coach."

Reich halted his cart. "You've lost your mind."

CATCH UP ON THE STORY

Stanford hires Frank Reich as interim football coach as Andrew Luck opts for familiarity

Stanford general manager Andrew Luck played for Reich with the Colts in 2018.

"Are you sure?"

"Are you *really* sure?"

Reich knew the answer, but he never stopped holding out a sliver of hope that his old quarterback might change his mind.

The coach shuffled through four different starters in Indianapolis after Luck retired, never finding one that lasted longer than a season. The void eventually cost Reich his job. Still, he came to admire Luck's conviction, starting with the sitdown in August 2019 that changed everything.

"I'm retiring," Luck confessed in that meeting with Reich, Ballard and owner Jim Irsay. "You're *what*?" came the response. Luck was raw and honest and unflinching that day, and never wavered in the years that followed. His coach always respected that.

Which is why, both believe, this unexpected rekindling in Palo Alto can work. The two made a pact: No matter what happens this season, Reich will not return in 2026. "Interim head coach" means one season, period. "I love Andrew," Reich says, "but I love my grandkids more."

Luck puts it this way: "The reason Frank and I have such a strong relationship is because we've been incredibly honest about everything from the very beginning."

He pauses, going back to some of the gutting moments and hard conversations they've shared. He knows what his decision six years ago cost his former coach.

"Look," Luck says, "I retired on him, right?"

Andrew Luck, here chatting with 49ers general manager and Stanford alum John Lynch, admits the Cardinal "have a lot to prove." (Courtesy Stanford Athletics)

Any sort of rebuild in Palo Alto is going to take time, even with a well of alumni support. "There's a lot of people who love Stanford who have very, very deep pockets," Doyle says. Luck's return, and Reich's arrival, has seemed to energize recruiting: The Cardinal have welcomed 18 transfers this year compared to four last season.

Luck's pitch — to high school players, donors and the college football world at large — starts with the quarterbacks who've played there. "Jim Plunkett, John Elway, myself." He touts Stanford's reach: "The best network in the world

"I get fired up thinking about that. I get to steward a legacy that's been around a long time."

He is undeniably energized by both the pressure and the stakes, welcoming them like he would a blitzing linebacker on third-and-long. *Our best against your best*, remember, *nowhere to hide*.

But that moxie cost him, and pain became a staple of his old job. A different kind awaits in his new one.

Luck knows there's a world where he's nowhere near a football field right now — designing high-rises for a swanky architectural firm or hiding out on a ski slope in some city no one's ever heard of. Instead, he's trying to save a program that even *he* might not be able to save. The reality is Stanford may never win big in the NIL era. After Luck fired Taylor, one of the team's seniors, Jay Green, called him, worried about the direction of the program. "Jay, this isn't the NBA," Luck told him. "We're not tanking for the first pick."

The season opens Aug. 23 in Hawaii.

"Listen, I used to play quarterback," Luck says, letting a small smile crease his face again. "You know when people are watching you, waiting for you to make big decisions in high-pressure situations. You make them, and you live with them."

That's the pull. That's what kept tugging at him after he walked away, and why he was ready to scream "HELL YEAH" when offered the job. The locker room — *his* old locker room — needed him. Andrew Luck walked out on one. He wasn't ready to walk away from another.

"I owe it to them," he says of the Stanford players. "That part of it is personal to me."

Which is why, late on a Monday evening in the spring, Luck is nowhere close to heading home for the day. A recruit stops by his office. The new GM leans in with his pitch. "I'm Andrew …" After the visit wraps, Luck bolts into the hallway, breezing past a familiar floor-to-ceiling image just to his right. It's him in another life, back when he was young and strong and looking to throw deep, the picture of so much promise.

He never gives it a glance.

(Demetrius Robinson / The Athletic; photo courtesy Stanford Athletics)

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